

5

25X1

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

Memorandum



THE SITUATION IN VIETNAM

Information as of 1600
20 March 1966

PREPARED FOR THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL
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ARMY review(s) completed.

State Dept. review completed

25X1

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20 March 1966

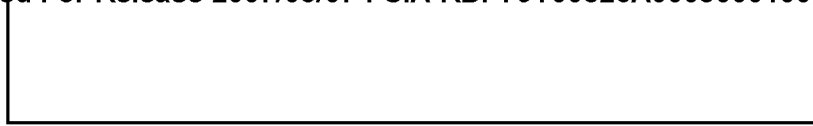
HIGHLIGHTS

The sparsity of political agitation over the weekend, particularly in I Corps, suggests that the Buddhists are postponing a showdown. Buddhist leaders, however, appear to be preparing for a direct confrontation with the government in the near future if their demands continue to be resisted. Several sharp engagements in widely separated areas marked the military situation in the past two days.

I. The Military Situation in South Vietnam:
Viet Cong troops in battalion strength overran the An Hoa outpost near Quang Ngai city on 19 March (Para. 1). Communist forces suffered moderate casualties in several sharp engagements in widely separated areas this weekend (Paras. 2-3). The Communists are continuing to make every effort to fill out their military structure in South Vietnam through both infiltration from North Vietnam and local recruitment (Paras. 5-7).

II. Political Developments in South Vietnam:
Most of South Vietnam was free of political agitation this weekend, suggesting that the Buddhists have postponed an immediate showdown over the government's decision to remain firm (Para. 1). Buddhist leaders, however, held a mass meeting in Saigon and appear to be carefully preparing the ground for an early confrontation with the claim that the government had previously agreed to meet several of the Buddhist demands (Paras. 2-4). A member of the ruling military Directorate believes that the situation is dangerous and requires careful handling in order to avoid giving the Buddhists an incident to exploit and to maintain unity in the Directorate (Para. 5). Premier Ky, now out of Saigon, is voicing determination to make no concessions, although Chief of State Thieu in Saigon has privately promised restraint in handling the Buddhists (Paras. 6-7). A number of prominent Vietnamese believe that support for the Buddhists as well as for General Thi is far from solid (Paras. 8-9).

25X1



25X1


IV. Other Communist Military Developments:
There is nothing of significance to report.

V. Communist Political Developments:

25X1

25X1

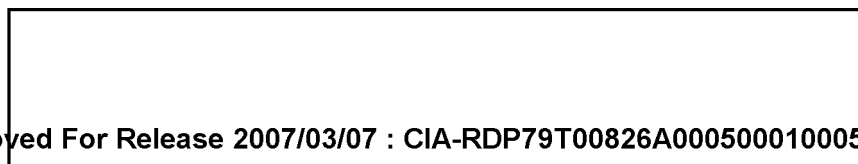


 Hanoi and Peking gave heavy propaganda play to "Anti-US Day" 19 March (Paras. 3-4).

25X1

VI. Other Major Aspects: South Korean National Assembly authorizes dispatch of 20,000 additional troops to South Vietnam (Para. 1).

20 March 1966



25X1



I. THE MILITARY SITUATION IN SOUTH VIETNAM

1. Several sharp engagements marked the military situation in South Vietnam this weekend. In the north, Viet Cong troops in battalion strength overran the An Hoa outpost some 15 miles northwest of Quang Ngai city on 19 March. Casualties among the company of South Vietnamese defenders include 25 killed, eight wounded, and 41 missing. A three-battalion US Marine and ARVN operation, designated Operation TEXAS, has been launched in reaction to the attack. No contact has been reported thus far.

2. Farther north, a company of US Marines, conducting a sweep near Da Nang on 19 March, killed ten Viet Cong in a brief skirmish before coming under heavy enemy automatic weapons and 81-mm. mortar fire. US casualties were three killed and 26 wounded. Reinforcements were brought in and the enemy broke contact.

3. In action today, elements of the US 25th Infantry Division conducting Operation GARFIELD in Pleiku Province killed 18 Viet Cong in a brief firefight. One US soldier was wounded. On the coast, US Marines have killed 11 guerrillas thus far in an operation initiated today 15 miles northwest of Hue. Farther south in coastal Phu Yen Province, elements of the US 101st Airborne Brigade surprised a Viet Cong ambush force and killed 20 guerrillas in a 45-minute exchange. Heavy fighting has been reported in Darlac Province between CIDG forces and an estimated Viet Cong battalion. Preliminary reports put Viet Cong casualties at 109 killed. Government casualties are 14 wounded (2 US).

4. Operation HONOLULU, a seven-day combined US-ARVN sweep in Hau Nghia Province, ended on 19 March. Final casualty figures show three US killed and 52 wounded. Viet Cong losses were 13 killed and 14 captured.

5. According to a recent MACV assessment, the Communists are continuing to make every effort to

20 March 1966

I-1

25X1

fill out their military structure in South Vietnam through both infiltration from North Vietnam and local resources. The Viet Cong division structure so far identified--six in existence and two being formed--is still below strength. In part, this enemy build up has been slowed by heavy losses suffered as a result of allied ground operations and air strikes and by increasing difficulties in recruiting local replacements for battle losses. Since 1 January 1966, MACV has confirmed that 37 different Viet Cong/North Vietnamese battalions have been contacted by friendly forces and have suffered heavy casualties, forcing them to withdraw from combat to recover. MACV still estimates that some 70 to 80 percent of the Viet Cong/PAVN battalions known to be in South Vietnam are battle worthy.

6. The improved Communist military posture, not only within South Vietnam, but in Laos and in North Vietnam adjacent to the Demilitarized Zone, has permitted a sharp increase in infiltration of troops. In October 1965, according to MACV, three regimental units, one unit with 1,000 men and one battalion-size unit, were infiltrated. From October through February 1966, at least 11,280 infiltrators entered South Vietnam. There is no evidence that air strikes have significantly reduced enemy capabilities to support existing and anticipated force levels, and a high rate of infiltration is expected to continue or increase.

7. From a logistic point of view, the Communists will require a constant flow of supplies and replacements from the North "to prepare the battlefield" for maximum use of their force structure. Beginning in the transitional months of April and May, the advent of the southwest monsoons will adversely affect Communist logistic support capabilities through Laos because of flooding and poor trafficability of roads, although infiltration of men can probably continue at present rates. There is evidence that the Communists are taking full advantage of the present favorable weather in Laos to buildup material stocks and manpower for future operations.

20 March 1966

I-2

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II. POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

1. The absence of political agitation generally during the weekend, and particularly in I Corps, suggests that the Buddhists are postponing an immediate showdown over the ruling Directorate's decision to hold firm against Buddhist demands. Buddhist leaders, however, appear to be carefully preparing the groundwork for a direct confrontation in the near future if the government remains unyielding.

2. Buddhist Institute chairman Thich Tam Chau told a meeting of some 10,000 followers in Saigon yesterday that the Institute reaffirmed the need for fulfillment of the four points listed in its 12 March communiqué. Chau also claimed specifically that Chief of State Thieu and Premier Ky had agreed with the Buddhists on the desirability of the four-point program and had promised the early establishment of a constituent assembly. Chau was referring to a meeting on 17 March between Thieu, Ky, himself, and two other prominent Buddhist monks, Thich Thien Minh and Thich Ho Giac. Thich Tri Quang, the principal Buddhist strategist who represents the Hue area, had told the US Embassy afterward that the meeting appeared to satisfy Buddhist demands.

3. On 19 March, the day after the Directorate met and agreed to hold firm, Tri Quang told a US Embassy officer that the government must soon announce elections for a constituent assembly, which would have the twofold function of "confirming" the government in office for a given number of months, and of drafting a constitution. He said that the elected assembly could not dissolve the government until so authorized by acquiring legislative powers under the constitution. Quang stated, however, that if steps are not taken in the near

20 March 1966

II-1

future to elect members of the constituent assembly, the Buddhists would be forced into a situation similar to their opposition to Premier Tran Van Huong, whose government fell under Buddhist pressure.

4. From the reports of both government and Buddhist leaders, it appears that in their talks last week both sides did agree on the need for a national election in 1967, on the need for democratic political institutions such as a constitution, and on the need for social and economic reforms. The Buddhists are agitating for eventual civilian government and the return to strictly military duties not only of the Directorate, but also of all military officers who engineered the "revolution" against the Diem regime, including retired generals of the Minh junta. The immediate source of contention between the government and the Buddhists is what form a consultative body takes: a Buddhist-inspired constituent assembly or a Directorate-appointed constitutional convention.

5. Directorate secretary general Chieu, who was tasked with setting up an appointive advisory council and who is generally a moderate influence within the Directorate, has told a US Embassy officer that the situation is reaching a dangerous stage. According to Chieu, General Thieu's account of the 17 March meeting with Buddhist leaders is that Tam Chau interpreted mere discussion of the Buddhist demands to mean agreement, a position that Chau has now taken publicly and that Tri Quang has reiterated in private. In Chieu's opinion, Tri Quang cannot be budged and the situation required splitting Tam Chau from Quang, taking care not to create an "incident" and reaching some sort of consensus with Buddhist moderates without actually surrendering to their demands. Chieu observed that this would require maintaining the unity of the Directorate, which he described as "good now," but

20 March 1966

II-2

being weakened by the "followers" of some generals. He noted that some Directorate members are talking very tough, especially Ky who he said is very angry with the Buddhists.

6. Ky is still out of Saigon in the resort town of Dalat, where he may remain until 22 March. According to the official Vietnam press, Ky presided at a ceremony in Dalat yesterday at which he stressed that the government is determined not to submit to "irrational" demands.

7. Chief of State Thieu reassured General Westmoreland in a private talk in Saigon on 19 March that the government would exercise restraint in containing the Buddhists in order to avoid an incident which either the Buddhists or the Communists could exploit to inflame public emotions. Thieu said that he had explained to Buddhist leaders that the government wishes to proceed with its already announced plans for a council to draft a constitution, a public referendum to approve the constitution, and an election in 1967. He said he had told the Buddhists that the government was willing to find government positions, in some civilian capacity, for ex-generals of the Minh junta--Duong Van "Big" Minh, Tran Van Don, and Le Van Kim--but claimed that "Big" Minh desires no governmental responsibility. Thieu noted that the return of exiled General Nguyen Khanh is not acceptable to the Buddhists.

8. Meanwhile, there are signs that support for the antigovernment position is diminishing. Colonel Nguyen Ngoc Loan, chief of the Military Security Service and one of General Thi's "escorts" during the early part of Thi's assignment to I Corps, met with Tam Chau and other Buddhist clergy in Saigon on 19 March. Loan believes that Tri Quang is displeased with the lack of enthusiasm for the Buddhist campaign thus far. Loan also believes that General Thi, who remains in I Corps where he continues to appear in public but has presided over no rallies since 18 March, "has learned

20 March 1966

II-3

his lesson." Loan states that he has compiled a list of agitators in the northern provinces, some of whom will be arrested later, presumably when the situation quiets down. The new I Corps commander General Chuan reportedly remains confident that agitation in central Vietnam can be handled and will soon fade.

9. In the southern provinces, the Buddhist campaign has so far failed to win over such prominent Buddhist laymen as Mai Tho Truyen, who states that he is not involved in the confrontation. Other religions--the Catholics, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai--have adopted a "wait-and-see" attitude, although they may react with demands of their own if the Directorate yields to Buddhist pressure. Catholic militant Father Quynh is now voicing disagreement with the four Buddhist points, a prominent Catholic layman believes that the Buddhists are still divided and that the populace in I Corps is becoming weary of Buddhist-inspired turmoil, demonstrations, and strike calls.

20 March 1966

II-4



Next 1 Page(s) In Document Exempt

IV. OTHER COMMUNIST MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

1. There is nothing of significance to report.

20 March 1966

IV-1

25X1

V. COMMUNIST POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

25X1

3. Hanoi has been giving considerable propaganda attention to the commemoration of "Anti-US Day" 19 March--allegedly the 16th anniversary of an anti-American demonstration in Saigon during the visit of two US warships. "Anti-US Day" editorials and commentaries were carried in all Hanoi papers and the 19 March editorial in Nhan Day dismissed as "deceitful" the alleged US contention that neither side can win the war in Vietnam "because the Vietnamese have won, are winning, and will win ever greater victories."

4. In China, meanwhile, papers on the 19th frontpaged a Peking rally marking "Anti-US Day" and the "Week of Solidarity with the Vietnamese People." Both Hanoi and Peking's propaganda pronouncements, however, were merely variations on increasingly familiar themes and contained no new threats or allegations.

20 March 1966

V-1

25X1

VI. OTHER MAJOR ASPECTS

1. The bill authorizing dispatch of additional forces to South Vietnam passed the South Korean National Assembly on 20 March following a 21-hour marathon session. The bill provides for the deployment of an additional 20,000 troops, which will nearly double Korean combat forces committed to the struggle. Some ineptitude in the government party's handling of the bill and domestic press criticism of the measure, particularly aspects of its financing, led rival opposition parties to compete in demonstrating their opposition. These groups are clearly preparing to make much of the additional troop commitment in the upcoming election struggle.

20 March 1966

VI-1

25X1

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